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Lucia A Keegan 10/13/2006 10:25:06 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EG](#) [FR](#) [IS](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPTIANS PRESS FRENCH FOR DETAILS ON
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

REF: PARIS 6292

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Egyptian officials have been pressing their French counterparts to follow up on President Chirac's call for an international conference on the Middle East by spelling out what he hopes to achieve. The Egyptians believe the French may be backing away from the idea of an international conference and might settle for an "international meeting" to discuss confidence building measures. End summary.

Scaling Back Plans for International Conference?

12. (C) During an Oct. 10 meeting with Poloffs, Karim Refaat, Third Secretary at the Egyptian Embassy, described a "convergence" of French and Egyptian views on how to advance the Middle East Peace Process. To illustrate, he said the idea of holding an international conference on the Middle East -- which President Chirac proposed during his Sept. 19 address to the UN General Assembly -- was initially an Egyptian idea that won the support of other Arab states in the context of the 2002 Beirut Initiative. Since Chirac's speech, the Government of Egypt, at every level, has been encouraging the French to flesh out Chirac's proposal by clearly explaining to the international community what such a conference could achieve. "The French have a clear idea of what they want to do; their problem is that they do not have a clear idea of when, where, with whom, and in what context (UNSC or Quartet?)," said Refaat.

13. (C) Moreover, Refaat assessed that the French may be walking back the idea of a conference and might settle for an "international meeting" to discuss confidence building measures. Calling Chirac a "shrewd politician," Refaat opined that the French President's stock has risen in the Arab world as a result of his advocacy of Arab rights, and would likely remain high even if he is unable to deliver an international conference. (Note: Refaat and other local diplomats shared our impression, reported reftel, that Chirac's call caught the MFA by surprise; Herve Besancenot, the MFA DAS-equivalent for the Middle East, admitted to Japanese First Secretary Satoshi Uemura that he first heard the news while listening to President Chirac on the radio.)

Gaza

14. (C) Turning to Gaza, Refaat indicated that the French and Egyptians see eye-to-eye on the futility of trying to engineer the collapse of the Hamas-led PA government and share a belief that pressuring the Palestinians will ultimately backfire. "The more pressure the international community applies, the more Palestinians will dig in their heels to support Hamas," said Refaat. He claimed the GoE does not believe that Fatah is ready to resume power and stressed the need to empower PA President Abbas by giving him the tools (including control of financial aid) to win back the Palestinian street. In an interesting aside, Refaat suggested the U.S. gives too much credibility to Mohamed Dahlan, whom he sees as hamstrung by internal Fatah rivalries and tarnished by allegations of corruption. He noted that the GoE's immediate priority is to arrange the release of captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, to be followed by Israel's release of Palestinian parliamentarians. Addressing internal Hamas tensions, Refaat argued that it is only a matter of time until the Gaza-based Hamas leadership splits with Khalid Mishal's Damascus-based leadership. He assessed that Mishal spiked PM Ismail Haniyeh's attempt to form a national unity government with PA President Abbas both because "the time was not right" and to rein Haniyeh in by demonstrating that major political decisions are taken in Damascus, not Gaza.

Realpolitik a la Francaise

15. (C) Refaat's up-beat assessment of Franco-Egyptian cooperation on Middle East peace was shared by MFA desk officer for Egypt Elie Cavigneaux, who noted that the current political cooperation between France and Egypt works well at every level. He happily pointed to President Mubarak's multiple visits to Paris, adding that the Egyptian President will be returning in November or December for the opening of an Egypt-themed exhibit at the Grand Palais. Cavigneaux indicated that one reason relations between France and Egypt are so smooth is that -- even though President Chirac has personally raised the case of Ayman Nour with President Mubarak at least twice -- the French tend to minimize human rights in their bilateral dialogue with Cairo, taking advantage of the political cover afforded by the EU's engagement with Egypt on that issue.

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